ALL MY LIFE LONG
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Psalm 146: 1-10
Luke 7: 1-10

"I will sing praises to my God all my life long." Psalm 146:2 (NRSV)

> Praise is the duty and delight, the
> ultimate vocation of the human community;
> indeed, of all creation…
> We have a resilient hunger to move
> beyond self, to return our energy and
> worth to the One from whom it has
> been granted. In return to that One, we
> find our deepest joy.
>
> Walter Brueggemann
> *Israel's Praise*
> *Doxology against Idolatry and Ideology*

We come here this morning for a little perspective
in a world that seems to be out of control.
We come here to be reminded that you are,
that we are not alone,
that you care about your creation,
that you know each one of us and call us by name.
Startle us with your truth,
and open our minds and our hearts
to the good news of your love
in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Sometimes you have to employ a little creative subterfuge in order to abide by the clear injunction of Psalm 146 to praise the Lord as long as you live. Pearl Benisch, a young Jewish woman, was a prisoner in Bergen-Belsen, one of the most notorious of the Nazi concentration and extermination camps. Prisoners who were healthy and strong enough were put to work in factories as slave laborers. Pearl Benisch was assigned to a large sewing factory responsible for producing army uniforms. Every day at dawn, seven days a week she and other prisoners were marched from the camp to the factory, a stack of material was placed on her sewing machine: the quota was five uniforms a day. Failure to meet the quota, or producing flawed work could result in punishment. Pearl became proficient. Prisoners were

promised a half loaf of bread at the end of the week if they produced six uniforms a day. She began to produce six uniforms. But she was an observant Jew and the relentless seven day a week work schedule did not include a Sabbath, the day observant Jews do no work; keeping Sabbath was one of her deepest and most precious commitments. In fact, prisoners caught doing anything remotely related to Judaism were punished severely, sometimes sent to the gas chamber. If you were going to practice your religion, your relationship with God, it had to be very carefully. So Pearl began to produce seven uniforms a day, hid the extra ones in a pile of material. On the Sabbath, she threaded the needle on her machine, went through the motions of sewing, without actually sewing, folded and arranged and refolded the five extra uniforms, and at the end of the day turned them in to the guard. But then she was caught by her supervisor, himself a Jew forced to oversee and manage the production room. His life depended on meeting quotas and keeping order and discipline on the factory floor. He knew exactly what she was doing. He became enraged and forced her to sit back down at the sewing machine – "Now work" he commanded. "I will sit down as you wish," she said, handing him the five jackets, "but I will not work."

"Stubborn Jew," he screamed, angrier than ever. "Get up." Now standing face to face, he raised his arm as if to strike her. Pearl Benisch remembers:

> I stared straight into his eyes, which met mine. They expressed a certain acknowledgement, a weak, fleeting Jewish spark. Had he recalled something from his parents' home? Or had a vestige of Jewish faith, cherished by generations of ancestors, survived? One way or another, the spark was there: he could not extinguish it. At the last moment he restrained himself, and his hand descended slowly (From Pearl Benisch's war diary, *To Vanquish the Dragon*, retrieved from www.torah.org).

Sometimes you have to employ a little creative subterfuge in order to abide by Psalm 46's injunction to praise the Lord as long as you live.

The Bible makes the fascinating claim that the most important thing about you is your relationship with God, your creator. It is more important than anything else about you, more important than your college degree, your money, your profession, more important than your race, sexual orientation, social connections. Your relationship with your creator, the Bible claims, is the essence of your humanity. That relationship is expressed in many ways, keeping the Sabbath for an observant Jew, for instance… And the Bible makes the additional compelling assertion that your relationship with God is your salvation.

Don't put your hope in the prince, the Psalm warns. The prince, after all, can turn out to be Hitler, Stalin – demanding your ultimate obedience and

allegiance. Don't put your hope for salvation in a political ideology. That is exactly what Fascism and Communism tried and failed to do and be: an all encompassing program to recreate the world, to remake human beings, a thousand year Reich, a master race, Hitler promoted; a new world Marx, Lenin and Stalin promised, even if it meant elimination of a million of their own citizens. Don't put your ultimate trust for your salvation, your life and death, in anyone or anything but God, your savior.

Trusting the prince is not our problem. In fact, we have a long tradition of not trusting no matter who the prince is – one half of the electorate will think this is the worst thing that ever happened. The political authority is not our problem. About 300 years of democracy have taught us that there are great leaders and not so great leaders all of whom are fully accountable to the people who elect them. We can get pretty passionate and worked up about politics, about who is in the White House, or Governor, State Representative. We no longer look to them to save us.

Many social analysts think that in this culture of ours we look to money – financial security for meaning, and security to solve things. Others think that technology is the new deity – the hope for salvation. But idolatry dies slowly. Writing an editorial in the New York Times last week, "Our Fix-It Faith," Elizabeth Rosenthal observed that "the pressure to dig deeper and faster in the Gulf of Mexico has outpaced the knowledge about how to do it safely…Americans," she said:

have long had an unswerving faith that technology will save us – it is the cavalry

coming over the hill just as we are about to lose the battle… As we watch scientists struggle to plug the underwater well, it became apparent that our great belief in technology was perhaps misplaced. The President of the Pew Research Center reported on our consternation when planes were grounded because of the volcano ash cloud. People couldn't believe it. The reaction was 'Fix this. Fix this. This is outrageous.' (*New York Times*, May 28, 2010).

The volatile markets, stubborn unemployment – millions of gallons of oil in the waters of the Gulf of Mexico – sobering reminder that we ought always to be careful about who or what we are trusting for our salvation.

Psalm 146 was written maybe 2,600 years ago. It is part of what is known as the "Crescendo of Praise" at the end of the Book of Psalms – each beginning and ending with the words "Praise the Lord."

Psalm 147: "How good it is to sing praise to our God."

Psalm 148: "Praise him, sun and moon, all you shining stars."

Psalm 149: "Sing to the Lord a new song… praise his name with dancing."

And the final hymn in the collection, Psalm 150: "Praise him with lute and harp, tambourine and dance, strings and pipes, clanging cymbals – loud crashing cymbals," images that inspired the architects 100 years ago who designed this sanctuary, and placed high above us fourteen angels, each praising God, the way the Psalmist prescribes – lute, harp, pipes and crashing cymbals – they're all up there, 90 feet over our heads – all the time, every time we gather here to worship, pray, baptize babies, share bread and even commemorate and celebrate the lives of dear ones who have died – a loud, joyful symphony of praise. The fact that the ancients decided that the final chapter in a book that includes hymns and poems of lament, grief, anger with God, Psalms of great comfort and assurance, decided to conclude with praise indicates that they thought "praise" is the essence of it all.

"Praise is delightful," Walter Brueggemann writes. "Praise is the duty and delight, the ultimate vocation of the human community; indeed of all creation… We have a resilient hunger" inside us, Brueggemann says, "to return our energy and worth to the One from whom it has been granted. In our return to that One is our deepest joy." "Happy are those whose hope is in God" Psalm 146 declares (*Israel's Praise, Doxology against Idolatry and Ideology*).

Worship and praise, Brueggemann says, transforms the world. The purpose of worship and liturgy, he says, is to remake the world. I never understood what that meant, but I'm finally getting it, I think. When you are always thanking and praising God, when your heart is always open to God's presence and grace, everything is different. It has been the many experiences over the years, standing beside, walking with, dear people in the midst of difficult situations, dreadful personal loss: the death of a spouse, parent, child, and hearing how faith and trust in God suggests, at that moment, not despair, but gratitude for the gift of life, for the gift of life itself, and actually experiencing how praise transforms grief into thanksgiving. "There are two kinds of people: "whiners" and there are "praisers." There are people who can't let go of, or stop whining, talking about what's wrong with the weather, the auto industry, the music, the restaurant meal,…the Cubs, what's lacking, what is sure to go wrong tomorrow. And there are people who are so hopeful and grateful for what is, whatever it is, that they live in a different world, a new and better world. That's what Walter means, I think – and what the Psalmist meant – "Happy are those whose hope is in the God of Jacob."

The Psalm directs us to acknowledge that God is our creator, the source of our lives, the giver and sustainer of our existence. We are warned not to put too much trust in the prince, the politician, the political ideology. We are directed to open our minds to the existence of a supreme being and to

lift up our hearts and voices in joyful praise. Next, without warning, comes something altogether new, the most radical thing anybody ever said about the creator. The creator of all things is not off somewhere in the heavens, but present. The awesome Lord of creation is not hiding in a temple, on a mountaintop, but busy, at work in the world, on behalf of the weak and vulnerable. It's quite remarkable and utterly unique.

God executes justice for the oppressed,
gives food for the hungry
sets prisoners free
opens the eyes of the blind
lifts up those who are bowed down
watches over the strangers
upholds the orphan and widow (the most vulnerable in the ancient world).

This is a God who is busy with the realities of human life, busy supporting, helping, literally enabling those who, for one reason or another, are being denied the fullness of the life God gives. This God is not holding court on a heavenly throne but according to this Psalm acting in the world as "nurse, medic, social worker and community organizer" (See Daniel Geslin, *Feasting on the Word)*.

Embedded in that list of human needs the creator cares about and acts to alleviate, is the most radical, politically explosive, revolutionary idea in the world: namely that every individual human being is the object of God's concern: that every individual human life is important to God, has infinite value and is worthy of respect.

"No one ever taught that every person is valuable," says Diogenes Allen, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Princeton Theological Seminary. In a new book, *Theology for a Troubled Believer,* Allen says that holiness, which all ancient religions acknowledge and celebrate, in ancient Israel begins to show itself not only in the magnificent abundance of creation, but in a "call to give relief to the poor, the widows, the orphans, and more generally relief from injustice in government, commerce and social relations." Allen contrasts that Jewish idea with ancient Greece, "whose conceptions of justice, even in its most exalted form as found in Plato, fails even to notice the distress of the helpless in a society in which 90% of the people were slaves." That idea, that every human being has infinite value and must be treated with respect and fairness, which came directly from ancient Judaism and was endorsed and expanded by Jesus – is at the heart of the rise and growth of democracy, legal systems based on the rights of the individual, and political processes which slowly but steadily extend freedom, human rights to all. Allen observes that sometimes prominent intellectuals propose that there are no absolute values, that everything is a matter of personal

preference and cultural norm – even appalling practices like genital mutilation and jailing, or stoning same sex partners. Some have even suggested that care for the physically and mentally challenged is a waste of public money which could be better used for more important endeavors, but Professor Allen says, "The conviction that we all matter still haunts us." (Introduction, xxii, 21-29). It is why Christians care about the hungry homeless, the child threatened by violence on Chicago's Southside. It is why Christians get involved in human rights issues: the plight of illegal immigrants, the plight of the Palestinian people in Gaza, the plight of Israelis who look at the world with fear and foreboding, the plight of the man or woman denied across to all the blessings of life because of skin color or sexual orientation – not because of political ideology – liberal – conservative: but because the God of Abraham and Jacob, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, cares about justice for the oppressed, food for the hungry, lifts up those who are bowed down, watches over the strangers – and asks us to follow.

Sometimes it seems like religion makes it more complicated: that all the paraphernalia of religion – all the creeds, rules, rituals obscure what is absolutely clear.

True religion, according to our earliest and wisest sources is not ideas, concepts, theological theses. It is not rules, regulations, restrictions: it is certainly not about excluding people, regarding people as unworthy, flawed, and therefore unimportant and of no particular value.

True religion, according to our oldest and wisest source, is the acknowledgement that our lives come to us, daily, as a gift from the creator, the Lord of all, and that remarkably, the creator cares about us, about human life, every human life, particularly lives that are oppressed, marginalized, limited by suffering, sickness, fear, anxiety, grief, or by political oppression.

True religion is about praising God, trusting God with your life, your future, your salvation, and finally your death, and then because ultimate matters have been resolved, for the rest of your life, joining God in the joyful work of healing the world, respecting, celebrating every human life.

> Praise the Lord – who made heaven and earth –
> who gives food to the hungry, lifts up
> those who are bowed down, sets the
> prisoners free, watches over the strangers and
> upholds the widow and orphans.
>
> I will sing praises to my God all my life long.

Amen.